SPRING GARDEN COLLEGE
102 EAST MERMAID LANE CHESTNUT HILL, PENNA. 19118 215-242-3700

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A Presentation

on

Urban Youth, Their Long-Term Employment Prognosis

and

Necessary Remedial and Corrective Action

at

The 1982 Annual Meeting
of
The Urban Affairs Association
Philadelphia, PA

by

Edwin E. Scully
Associate Director of Development
Spring Garden College

April 16, 1982

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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The thrust of my presentation today is that three things must be done to help solve the educational and employment problems of urban youth. First, the national on-going, repetitious endemic epidemic of constantly formulating a youth policy must end soon. Some meaningful action must be undertaken. For example, the report of the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties dealt basically with policy statements. It urged the government to assign priority to the development of a blend of social and economic urban policies that encourage the health and vitality of the nation--but gave no action-oriented solutions. With regard to the problems of youth education and employment, the focus of my presentation today, the report only suggested a challenge but gave no solutions. The report offered that public schools' difficulties resulted from the "absence of planning for future demographic and social changes".

In a similar vein, a youth policy forum held in January by the Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University, dealt primarily with identifying the problems of youth; and although it came up with some good recommendations, the major focus there also was on policy formulation.

It is also noted that the American Youth Commission was established in 1935 by the American Council on Education with a mandate to consider the needs of youth and to plan experiments and programs which will be most helpful in solving the problems of youth. That mandate would be still valid today, 47 years later.

Assuming that an appropriate policy statement is established--such as all youth should be prepared to function as adults--the next thing to be done is to get down to developing the necessary problem-solving strategies. However, they should not be platitudinous recommendations, like to obtain a job, all one has to do is read the want ads. The responses to that particular solution

to unemployment reverberated throughout the nation. President Reagan had to explain later what he meant, but it did not prevent him from offering another questionable solution--to how to reduce the welfare roles: "If every church and synagogue in the United States would average adopting 10 poor families beneath the poverty level...we could eliminate all government welfare in this country". Tune in next month because our leadership may offer a solution to our housing problems. Just speculate for a moment what that may be! Thus, the second thing that must be done is to avoid simplistic solutions.

As a member of this University/Community Relations panel, I would like to present the third thing that must be done: Take a quantum leap from the realm of policy formulation and easy answers to that of taking action. Let us implement some strategies based upon solid fact. We know that many of our urban youth are performing poorly in school, many are dropping out, and are experiencing difficulties in obtaining employment. These situations are givens and are recognizable, definable, and quantifiable problems. For example, in the School District of Philadelphia 9,321 or 13.7% of all high school students dropped out in 1979-80. In 7 of the 32 schools, the rate was over 20%, with one school exceeding 30%. Many of them are now among the ranks of the structurally unemployed and will remain mostly unemployed or in low level jobs for a lifetime to come. However, completing high school and "obtaining a high school education" does not guarantee employment. Out of the class of 1975, almost 10% of the respondents to a survey were unemployed. The rate was 12% for blacks, and it is speculated that among non-respondents to the survey, the rate may be even greater. It is suggested that, at this conference today, we attempt to recommend some workable strategies to resolve this great urban problem of how to help our youth. Some ideas that I have are presented for your reaction and possibly for you to take action.

Youth unemployment is a problem that seems to attract the attention of everyone. It's a "safe" issue that all can address. Various public officials, economists, business leaders, school administrators, parents, and others all have different degrees of concern about the problem, and often have conflicting policy views on how to deal with it. Some have emphasized the detrimental impact of high youth unemployment on the formation of positive attitudes toward work, a healthy self image, and a commitment to values conducive to upwardly aspiring middle class behavior. Others have focused more narrowly on the unsatisfactory transition from school to work using such evidence to support the view that reform in public school education is long overdue. But no matter where observers begin in their assessment of the youth unemployment problem, they almost always end with the conclusion that considerable action is required if the nation is ever to improve the relative position of youth.

However, a cursory examination reveals that the numerous public initiatives toward youth have not reduced youth unemployment. In fact, as more public funds are spent on youth employment programs, the youth unemployment rate either has remained constant, or has increased. There is speculation about why there is so little impact on youth unemployment. One line of argument is that government is incapable of dealing with social problems generally, and youth unemployment in particular. According to this view, much of the youth unemployment problem is the product of demographic trends, together with the normal restiveness and insecurity of youth in their transition from adolescence to adulthood. Accordingly, it is posited that community-based organizations and various educational agencies need to become more involved--to demonstrate what youth unemployment is doing to further the turmoil and distress of urban living. This matter is too great to leave to the govern-

ment alone because it does not appear to be able to get a handle on the problem.

Aside from the general economic conditions, the singlemost reason why youth are unemployed is that they have no marketable skills. And it is most likely that this lack of a job skill is accompanied with a deficit in mathematics and communication skills. To illustrate, even youth who are applying to attend college have severe basic education problems. The College Board feels that the decline in SAT test scores reflects the incompleteness of "a national undertaking to afford meaningful equality of educational opportunity." The College Board also cites some other major developments that unfavorably impact upon test scores as follows:

.. A significant dispersal of learning activities and an emphasis on adding elective courses and thus a corresponding reduction in the number of courses that the students are required to take--to wit English and mathematics courses.

.. A diminished seriousness of purpose and attention to mastery of skills coupled with such things as automatic promotions, grade inflation, high absenteeism, the lowering of the demand levels of textbooks.

.. The extensive time consumed by television watching.

.. Changes in the role of the family in the educational process.

.. Disruption in community life and a diminution in young people's learning motivation.

Additionally, various studies and papers reviewed by the Board set forth other causes such as medical and drug problems, family configuration, textbook inadequacies, differences among schools, social changes, family income, changing public attitudes, discipline problems, school board policies, integration, busing and desegregation efforts, and the difficulty of getting "good" teachers.

I have a host of recommendations and corrective action for colleges to consider, but they are more appropriate for possibly a seminar emphasizing student readiness for college level work. However, the problems that were mentioned are practically the same that are also affecting the employability

of youth. First of all, the formal education structure cannot overcome these tremendous youth difficulties. They need help--particularly from community-based organizations. They are an invaluable resource which is being ignored and it is suggested they be given an opportunity to perform. I know first-hand in Philadelphia what the Urban Coalition Institute can do for ex-offenders and youth, what Scottie's Automotive Training Center is doing to train auto mechanics by repairing senior citizens' cars, how Simmons Youth Development Guild has trained youth in the repair of poor peoples' homes, what Haven House has done for unwed teenage mothers, how OPEN Inc. trained people to be health service workers, what Finley Place has done by transporting residents of North Philadelphia to suburban jobs, how Our Neighbors Civic Association has helped young female offenders, and what many other CBOs have done. To put it succintly, CBOs must be written into employment and training legislation or else they may not be involved in operating programs or even providing supportive services.

It is also realistic to anticipate that local educational agencies, the school districts, should be involved in corrective action. Their GED preparation programs, basic education capabilities, and area voc-tech schools and skills centers must be used--to at least prepare workers for entry level jobs and to give them the motivation to join the workforce. But there is also another resource that is generally overlooked in employment and training: institutions of higher education. Many colleges offer accredited continuing education programs that can prepare people in one year or less for jobs that start at $15,000 + a year, but the funding agency must be willing to pay a little extra for the required remedial and preparatory courses. Despite the fact that there can be allowable costs for remedial reading, mathematics, and other supportive services, funding agencies and in particular CETA prime

sponsors or service deliverers will be reluctant to provide for such support because it may distort their average cost per participant. Supportive services that provide for remediation in mathematics and communication skills are necessary and must be included in any federal legislation that may succeed the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA). However, there are problems with the two major bills in the Congress: The "Training for Jobs" bill and the "Human Capital Development and Productivity" bill. Both appear to be caught up in performance standards, administrative processes, controls, linkages, coordination, percentages, matching, composition of councils, and an almost fervent captivation with the concept of private sector involvement. Unfortunately, the authors of the bills are so attentive to those concerns that they are really neglecting most of those who are most in need. They are suggesting the creation of a national employment and training numbers game that is almost doomed to failure--notwithstanding the anticipated horrible reductions in spending. And rather than get into the ramifications of the administrative infrastructure and appropriations which others more able than I can address, I'd like to get into the real substance of the bills: the persons to be served, which include the youth of our cities.

The two bills contain numerous references to expected performance accomplishments, comparisons with previous years, developing criteria for measuring the return on investments, performance goals, basic measurement of performance, cost effectiveness, standards relating program expenditures to total earnings, gains and reductions in income maintenance payments, achievement standards, negotiation of performance standards, national minimum standards and the first bill even provides for the Governor to take action for not meeting performance criteria. In effect, the bills are setting up a new bureaucracy for "creaming" of participants and serving only those who are

almost leadpipe cinches for being successful. Prime sponsors, service deliverers or whatever they are called will not use rather limited funds to attempt to reach out to the functional illiterates, those without any basic skills, the really socially disadvantaged youth and the long term hard core unemployed and attempt to design, develop, implement, and conduct the long term programs that are necessary to turn them into job holders. No, instead they will take the displaced workers, the ones who have a trade or some skill that is easily transferable and after a few weeks they will be able to claim a positive placement and another reportable statistic in their part of the numbers game. Administrators and operators will feel more comfortable, for example, in training displaced clerk typists to be word processor operators instead of serving school dropouts who never had a job, and others who may not even be included in the official count of the unemployed. They will play it safe to satisfy the number mechanics.

It is suggested that this concept should be counterbalanced with set-aside programs that merit extra points for training and job placement of functional illiterates, the at-risk mothers, the recidivists, difficult youth, the long term welfare recipients, and many other persons with physical handicaps and learning disabilities. They are the ones who need the program services more than those who are temporarily disjointed because of the economy and who wish to shift to new occupations. Certainly they may need attention, but with a reduced budget, training and preparation of unskilled youth should take priority over retraining, if a priority needs to be established.

It should also be noted that both bills merely touch upon youth and really provide no incentives, or youth-targeted strategies for attacking the problem. How about some initiatives to return teenage dropouts to high school; or inner city work institutes for youth to acquire skills for revitalizing deteriorating

neighborhoods; or residential skills centers as alternatives to incarceration; or special language programs combined with work experience for Hispanic youth; or setting up urban Job Corps Centers that could tie in with the public schools, government installations, and with community-based organizations? No prime sponsor or service deliverer will attempt such "daring" programs because again, they are to be measured by the numbers. Instead, we'll probably operate with safe watered-down programs like the Summer Youth Employment Training programs that won't do much more than keep the youth off the streets. The language of both bills will strangle any attempts to be innovative.

In an attempt to be a little innovative today, it is suggested that all at-risk youth be involved in action-oriented programs that will turn them around. The essence of these efforts should be individualized prescriptions that will treat each as unique persons, which they are, and involve them in long term corrective and remedial activities. Some at-random possibilities that we might discuss today are presented as follows:

1. Developing a program to return teen-age dropouts to high school.

2. Developing of integrated projects operated at the grassroots CBO level involving training, work experience, subsidized employment, GED programs, job development, employment referrals, and intensive involvement with local business and industry.

3. Establishing self-help job referral and placement agencies within existing community-based organizations.

4. Establishing non-profit corporations to create job opportunities.

5. Developing unsolicited proposals to the U.S. Department of Labor to establish Job Corps Centers within urban communities.

6. Establishing an inner city work institute to help revitalize deteriorating neighborhoods by rehabilitating homes, repairing senior citizens' homes, doing maintenance "chores" for the economically disadvantaged, winterization of homes, and clearing of refuse-laden lots, parks, yards, and various public places.

7. Establishing academies or schools within schools to provide job skills training in the framework of public education--but with the support of local business.

8. Providing remedial reading programs for youth who are at a reading level that prevents them from obtaining employment.

9. Providing special assistance to youth who are released from military service because they are found to be "unfit" for the demands of military life.

10. Providing special training projects for unmarried mothers so that they may become self-sufficient.

11. Providing special training and job opportunities for youth to work in day care centers, boarding homes, nursery homes, health care centers, senior citizen facilities, and community-based organizations.

12. Developing projects to encourage youth to go on to higher education by way of special emphasis, scholarships, use of business support, fund raising, appeals, etc.

13. Developing "adopt a youth" projects to provide for youth involvement with successful role models, interested community people, and business, civic, and labor leaders.

14. Developing of special language program for Hispanics in order to help youth in the job market.

15. Developing of a resource catalog that youth may use in locating various support services and assistance in the community.

Involvement of our youth in some kind of activity that will strike a note of responsiveness is essential. They must be designed and fully funded over the long haul. Our youth must overcome the educational and even the attitudinal deficits that prevent them from participating in meaningful work or going on to skills training and/or higher education. It is imperative that action be initiated for the 50% unemployed youth who are in transition to becoming the 30% unemployed adults of the future. There are no greater tasks before us than to expand the horizons of urban youth; to let them know that someone does care for them; and to help them develop new lifestyles as viable alternatives to what they are presently experiencing.